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Michael Duncan Overton

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# **MIND OVER MUSCLE: A CONCEPTUAL PIECE COMPARING THE SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE PHILOSOPHY OF JUDO AND SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING**

Michael Duncan Overton<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** This is an exploratory examination of the similarities of the core principles of Judo and Self-Directed Learning (SDL). Both Judo and SDL can be considered ways of life that the student is committed to. By comparing the similarities between each educational theory this paper seeks to add another beam of support to the bridge between Eastern and Western ideologies.

## **Introduction**

In 1882 a new form of martial art was born from a synthesis of the best of the traditional jujutsu/jujitsu of Japan's past. Kodokan Judo, created by Jigoro Kano, is a holistic and systematic form of education, one that focuses on training of the mind, body, and spirit of the individual. Creating a better person in the process of this training is the ultimate goal of judo, not just for the pinnacle of self-actualization and performance but for the betterment of society as well. Judo is a journey, path, and way of life where the student is committed to a lifetime of learning or lifelong learning.

However when we think of judo or any other martial art the first image that usually comes to mind is someone fighting (unless you have had previous exposure to the philosophies and practices of martial arts). This image of a martial artist as someone who only knows how to fight is glorified in many cultures by media and other sources, regardless of hemisphericity. This stereotype focuses heavily on the physical aspects and too often ignores any of the philosophical or theoretical features of martial arts.

Judo was created as a holistic system for training the mind, body, and spirit of the student. Its main objective is to cultivate a better person through physical, mental, and emotional training, all of which are required to properly achieve this goal. The philosophical and theoretical aspects of judo have been largely ignored by Western researchers who focus on analysis of Eastern practices such as Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Animistic, Shamanistic, etc. as forms of education, especially in the field of Adult Education.

By addressing this gap in the literature I hope to come closer to bridging the chasm between a predominantly Eastern and Western system of education. An exploratory examination of the

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<sup>1</sup> University of Tennessee, Knoxville

similarities of the core principles of judo and Self-directed Learning (SDL) can speak to both educational theories and frameworks allowing for a synthesis of theory and practice.

I will first examine the theory and philosophy of judo from an educational lens as written by its founder, Jigoro Kano, and embodied in its two core principles, Jita Kyoei and Seiryoku Zenyo. Next I will examine, briefly, the main underpinnings of the educational theory of Self-directed Learning. Then I will attempt to synthesize both theories illustrating overlap and similarities that have the potential to be beneficial for both Eastern and Western Perspectives. Finally I will conclude with a discussion and open call for dialog on the topic of bridging Eastern and Western perspectives as well as examining limitations and future directions for this topic.

## **Judo**

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, judo is a form of martial arts originating in Japan but has spread internationally to all cultures of the world, with judo being acknowledged as “an international sport knowing no boundary between states or races. It is a sport in which millions of people throughout the world are engaged” (Inokuma & Sato, 1979, p 8). Before examining any further it will be helpful to have a brief history of judo.

To begin the difference between jujutsu and judo needs to be established. The techniques of jujutsu were known throughout Japan prior to the Edo period (1603-1868). Many of these techniques were developed and practiced in order to perfect attacks that involved striking, stabbing, joint manipulation and breaking, pinning, choking, and the defense against these (Kano, 1986). However during the Edo period the techniques began to be systematically taught and refined into a number of different schools with a number of different masters, each focusing on particular aspects, or styles, that they believed to be the most important. It is during this abundance of styles that a young Jigoro Kano began to undertake his studies of jujutsu.

By some historical accounts Kano was a frail youth standing only 5 feet 2 inches and weighing 90 pounds when he was introduced to jujutsu. But the principles of using your opponent's energy, momentum, and size against them caught on immediately. Through practice and seeking out other forms of jujutsus and masters Kano eventually created Kodokan Judo which incorporated the techniques he believed to be beneficial and excluded those that he believed did not align with the principles he had come to believe in and that formed the main theories of judo, “seiryoku zenyo” and “jita kyoei”.

## **Seiryoku Zenyo**

According to Kano, “one's mental and physical energy must be used most effectively in order to achieve a certain goal. That is to say, one must apply the most effective method or technique for using the mind and body” (Kano, 2005, p. 43). He translated this into the phrase *seiryoku saizen katsuyo* (best use of one's energy) and shortened it to the phrase *seiryoku zenyo* (maximum efficiency). According to Kano “this means that no matter what the goal, in order to achieve it, you must put your mental and physical energy to work in the most effective manner” (Kano, 2005, p. 43). Examples of *seiryoku zenyo* given in *Mind Over Muscle*, show the use of your opponent's strength against them to overcome an attack, going with a flow of energy being used

against you instead of resisting it, and the use of leverage, fulcrum points, balance, and timing in order to overcome your opponent (Kano, 2005). All of these examples rely on the most efficient use of energy that cannot be properly utilized if force is supplied by the “tori” or individual doing the technique. This idea of going with, and maximum efficiency is the concept embodied by the “ju” of judo, which translates into English as gentle.

“Do” is translated as the way, also similar to the Chinese word and character “Tao” which also means *way*. The Kanji or Japanese character that makes the “do” means to travel, follow a path, or walk and signifies a journey. Kano stresses that in order to apply the concept of seiryoku zenyo appropriately in intellectual as well as emotional endeavors, the practitioner must have clearly defined goals. Without clearly defined goals the energy expended on these pursuits cannot be used efficiently. Kano says that you must proceed, taking care with your training, and embark on the do with a sincere commitment to waza and mental development (Kano, 2005). He says that some people will excel at waza or techniques but that is focusing on physical training and neglecting the mental aspects. He believes, as do I, that training only the body is not good enough and is not part of the “do”, that training the mind in intellectual as well as moral pursuits is necessary. These two categories of intellectual pursuits and moral pursuits make up the “do” of judo.

Kano makes clarification between intellectual training. He believed that it could be considered in two distinct but not dissimilar ways:

In actual fact, people who have sound knowledge and people who have good judgment are not necessarily the same. Caution, observation, reasoning, judgment, and imagination are mental powers, so from this standpoint we can make a slight distinction between being widely knowledgeable and having sound judgment. In this way, with regard to intellectual training we can make a distinction between gaining broad knowledge and developing powers of inference and judgment. (Kano, 2005, p.61)

Kano continues refining this distinction by stating that:

Intellectual training involves both the acquisition of knowledge and the cultivation of mental power...The cultivation of these powers does not in itself entail becoming knowledgeable, so in fact, these two things can be looked at separately. Thus, in education the question of whether to place greater emphasis on the cultivation of mental power or to put greater effort into the acquisition of knowledge may arise. Therefore, if our goal is not clear the method cannot be determined. Once the goal has been clearly established, one can study how one's energy can best be put to use in order to achieve it-seiryoku zenyo. (Kano, 2005, p.67)

This concept of clearly defined goals being necessary to use energy in an efficient way in order to know what it is you are wanting to learn, be it the acquisition of knowledge or the cultivation of mental powers such as reasoning and judgment, is the first aspect of “do” in his writings. This is something more than just exercising the body this is a pursuit of knowledge and mental power that can extend throughout the life of the practitioner.

From an educational lens *seiryoku zenyo* can best be used to describe goal setting behaviors and how they should be implemented by the individual to achieve the most efficient and beneficial outcome. Kano stated that the goals whether for training the body or training the mind, i.e. educational, must be clearly stated for the individual. Once the goals are clearly stated then the most efficient use of energy, physical or mental, should be used to reach the goals with the minimum amount of effort expended in achieving the desired outcome.

## **Jita Kyoei**

Much like *seiryoku zenyo*, *jita kyoei* is another core principle of judo as put forth by Jigoro Kano. It means “mutual prosperity through mutual assistance and concession” (Kano, 2005, p. 71). This principle relates to how one should interact within a group setting. Utilizing the principles of *seiryoku zenyo* for oneself is simple enough to understand but how one uses it in a group dynamic of more than one person, i.e. at least two, is more challenging. Kano tells us when a group is formed it takes only:

one person to act selfishly, and conflict can easily arise. But if every party in a group avoids acting selfishly and acts considerately to the needs and circumstances of the other people in the group, then conflict can naturally be avoided and harmony achieved. Conflict is to mutual detriment just as harmony is to mutual gain. (Kano, 2005, p. 70)

This further relates to group dynamics such as attaining assistance from others when needed, especially when you are weak in an area and another person is more proficient than yourself. This group dynamic offers an advantage that you would not have alone and only if all parties are able to work together in the group. Kano called this concept “*sojo sojou jita kyoei*, which means mutual prosperity through mutual assistance and concession” (Kano, 2005, p. 71) and shortened it to *jita kyoei*.

A practical example of *jita kyoei* employed on an individual basis can be seen in the practice of “kata” and “randori”. The practice of judo requires the individual to typically use an “*uki*”, or partner, to perform a technique. By practicing with a partner you are learning to throw but your partner is learning to fall, which is critical for the practice of judo. In order for your partner to learn how to fall safely you must throw them properly and through this exchange you are both benefiting and learning from each other.

It seems obvious how *jita kyoei* can pertain to education regardless of age. The basic model of most educational systems is that of the teacher and student, a dyadic relation. Even if a learner were to go off and study by themselves there is still a dyadic relation between the learner and the other, whether in their imagination or in the pages of a book. This concept of mutual gain takes the relation a step further and conceives of it as a two way street or reciprocal action. The nature of the relation is not a one sided affair but it consists of all parties involved working toward a goal.

Synthesizing both concepts of *jita kyoei* and *seiryoku zenyo* together allows us to view judo as a complete educational system. The goals which are determined by the individual and the most efficient use of one’s energy is utilized in order to complete them. But this direction and action

are taken in relation to the others in the group, either relying on their strengths in order to supplement your weaknesses or allowing your “virtues and strengths...[to] complement and foster those of another” (Kano, 2005, p. 71). Thus the study and practice of judo desires to cultivate better people in their lifelong journey of education not only for themselves but also for the benefit of society and the other.

### **Self-Directed Learning**

In the *Profession and Practice of Adult Education* (2007) Merriam and Brockett highlight a concept that has become synonymous with the field of practice in adult education, in North America, Self-Directed Learning (SDL). Tracing the conception in early research they point to “writing by Houle (1961), Tough (1967 and 1979), and Knowles (1975). This body of work refers to that learning in which “*the learner chooses to assume the primary responsibility for planning, carrying out, and evaluating those learning experiences*” (Caffarella, 1993, as Cited in Merriam and Brockett, 2007, pp. 15-16). They further state that “adults assuming control of their learning--is as old as history...[but] there has been much discussion about what constitutes self-directed learning” (Merriam & Brockett, 2007). Some researchers have viewed SDL in the context of systematic processes where others have viewed it as a more complex process considering the “internal state of the individual learner (Kasworm, 1983) or the social context in which such learning takes place (Brookfield, 1985, as cited in Merriam & Brockett, 2007, p. 138).

The research on SDL has been categorized by many academics. “Brockett and Hiemstra have divided this research into three categories defined by research methodology: (1) *learning projects research*... (2) *quantitative measures of self-direction*... and (3) *qualitative studies*” (Merriam & Brockett, 2007). Caffarella (1993), “on the other hand, has categorized the research according to the form and process of learning, learner characteristics, and preferences, and fostering learner initiative and control in formal settings” (as cited in Merriam & Brockett, 2007, pp. 139-140). Merriam and Brockett go on to state “several key trends can be gleaned from the body of knowledge” (Merriam & Brockett, 2007, p. 140). The first trend is that self-directed learning:

is the most frequent way in which most adults chose to learn...there is a strong connection between self-directed learning and self-concept...several other personality and social characteristics are connected to self-directed learning...research has made it possible to gain a more holistic view of the adult learner. (Merriam & Brockett, 2007, p. 140)

There are other models and theories that focus on self-directed learning as a process both linear and interactive, as well as an instructional model, and personal attribute which instruments such as the SDLRS and OCLI have been designed to measure the self-directedness of an individual. Regardless of how SDL is measured, what theoretical framework is used to define it or characterize it, or whether it is viewed as a process or an attribute, a shared commonality runs through each iteration: responsibility, autonomy, and goal setting.

Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) expand on the goals that self-directed learning can be oriented toward. They believe that most goals are often defined by the writer but that there are three groups: “(1) to enhance the ability of adult learners to be self-directed in their learning, (2) to foster transformational learning as central to self-directed learning, and (3) to promote emancipatory learning and social action as an integral part of self-directed learning” (p. 107).

### **Enhancing the Ability**

The first goal described above relates to the learner and educator enhancing the self-directedness of the learner, which can be viewed as “a set of personal attributes and specific skills” (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Caffarella, 2000; Merriam et al., 2007, p. 107). This goal requires the educator to help the learners to be able to plan, execute, and evaluate their own learning wherever that may occur. Also it requires the learner to seek out the necessary assistance, whether from other individual sources or maybe within a community of learners. In order for this goal to be achieved the learner must take responsibility and become proactive in their learning.

### **Transformational**

The second goal regarding transformational learning as central to self-directed learning is found primarily in the work of Mezirow (1985) and Brookfield (1985, 1986) (Merriam et al., 2007). The goals of this type of transformation revolve around a critical reflection by the adult learner in order to understand better their “historical, cultural, and biographical reasons for their needs, wants, and interest” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 108). This implies autonomy in the self-directed learner only if they become aware of their position and station in society and how they may have taken for granted their learning. Brookfield also states, “the most complete form of self-directed learning occurs when process and reflection are married in the adult’s pursuit of meaning” (as Cited in Merriam et al., 2007, p. 108). This idea of critical reflection on the part of the adult learner is crucial to the goals of self-directed learning, it is “foundational to the third goal of self-directed learning: promoting emancipatory learning and social action” (as Cited in Merriam et al., 2007, p. 108).

### **Emancipatory Learning and Social Action**

The third goal of self-directed learning concerns a need for learning to not only be concerned with the individual outcomes and “examination by the learners of the sociopolitical assumptions under which they learn and function but also the incorporation of collective action as an outcome” (as cited in Merriam et al., 2007, p. 108). According to Collins, “the most persistent and eloquent in echoing these concerns...that...ethical and political concerns about self-directed learning should be part of this dialogue” (as cited in Merriam et al., 2007, p. 109). Brookfield argues much in the same way:

having learners exercise control over all educational decisions needs to be a consistent element of self-directed learning. As such, educators of adults in formal and nonformal settings need to shift to learners as much control as possible in the learning process. (as Cited in Merriam et al., 2007, p. 109)

This shift in control places much if not all responsibility for the process and outcome that the learner desires into their own hands. Brookfield notes that this could be difficult in areas where the culture is controlling such as higher educational institutions and corporations (Merriam et al., 2007), but offers a potential solution by which educators “might decide to work collectively at changing the political culture of institutions” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 109).

### **So what are the Similarities?**

There are some similarities that exist between the core principles of judo and those goals and attributes described of self-directed learning. Table 1 represents the similarities. The similarities focus on just the educational aspects of both systems with other avenues of inquiry discussed later in the final part of this paper.

| <b><u>JUDO</u></b>   | <b><u>SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING</u></b>                      |
|--|---|
| Seiryoku Zenyo and the “Do”                                  | Responsibility for Own learning                           |
| Internationally Recognized in All Cultures                   | Most frequent way adults choose to learn                  |
| Cultivation of Better People and Self-Actualization          | Connection between SDL and Self-concept                   |
| Jita Kyoei and Cultivation of Better People                  | Connection between Personality and Social Characteristics |
| Holistic Form of Education and Development of the Individual | Holistic View of the Adult Learner                        |
| Jita Kyoei   | Transformational  |
| Seiryoku Zenyo and Jita Kyoei                                | Emancipatory and Social Action                            |
| Way of Life and Lifelong Learning                            | Way of Life and Lifelong Learning                         |

Table 1

Assuming responsibility for one’s own learning is a hallmark of self-directed learning. My research on all researchers who have had anything to say about SDL has convinced me to believe that this to be true of the theory. The similarity between judo and SDL in this regard can be drawn between the concept of *seiryoku zenyo* and the “Do” of judo. *Seiryoku zenyo* means the most efficient use of one’s mental and physical energy, added to the concept of “Do” or the way can be taken to mean the most efficient way for the individual to learn. According to my readings of Kano’s teachings this most efficient way is not to learn in a vacuum by yourself but to seek out others who can support and nurture your learning. This implies that the responsibility for learning rests solely on the shoulders of the learner and in order to be efficient must be their own way of learning.



Self-directed learning and self-concept are also highly related to each other. Through the instruments created to measure this relation such as the SDLRS, OCLI, PRO model, and the PROSDLS there is a wealth of information to support this connection. As for how it relates to the concepts of judo we need to look at the idea of cultivating better people and self-actualization. This cultivation of better people entails that through the practice of judo the individual will become a more self-actualized person. Striving for a pinnacle of the human condition both physically and mentally. This act of cultivating the body, mind, and spirit creates a self-concept of the individual for them, that they can be proud of and confident in especially in their interactions with others and society. In general, individuals who are highly self-directed also have a high self-concept and are less likely to suffer from attributes related to a low self-concept. Many individuals who practice judo should be embodying the principles through their practice and therefore should be highly self-directed in their learning, which means that they should also have a high self-concept. It has been my experience that many adults I have taught martial arts too will develop this increase in their self-concept through the practice of martial arts, especially judo.

Self-directed learning “is the most frequent way in which most adults chose to learn” (Merriam & Brockett, 2007, p. 140). This would imply that the large majority of the world’s population chooses to engage in SDL for most of their daily life inside and outside of formal education. That equates to a lot of people that practice SDL. Judo is an internationally recognized sport and part of the Olympics. There are numerous practitioners across the globe in every culture and on every continent. By sheer probability the vast majority of judoka are also self-directed learners.

In self-directed learning, there are strong connections between people who are high on SDL and certain personality attributes and social characteristics. A comparison of three instruments that measure the self-directed learning of individuals done by Cox and Overton (2014) show that the SDLRS, OCLI, and PROSDLS are all highly interrelated in the factors that they claim to measure of self-directed learners. Some of these factors are: initiative and independence, control, self-concept, self-efficacy, responsibility, motivation, love of learning, positive orientation to the future, etc....Learners rate highly in these domains are likely to be highly self-directed learners. This cultivation of better people implies instilling in them the characteristics that allow them to become better individuals, for themselves and society. These characteristics that the practice of judo attempts to instill in individuals such as seeking out help in learning endeavors, thinking of not only your actions but how they will affect others in the relationship, autonomy, and quick decisive action synchronize well with the same characteristics that highly self-directed individuals should embody as well.

Research in self-directed learning has given educators and learners a complete and holistic view of the adult learner as someone situated within a context both social and historical. As a unique individual learner with strengths and weaknesses, if given the tools to become self-directed in learning, she or he will compensate for the areas that may be lacking. Self-directed learning encompasses the whole experience and development of the adult learner. The aim of judo is to develop the individual to be better, for themselves and society. This betterment or cultivation of the individual means that a holistic and encompassing form of education must be provided to the individual to choose.

Self-directed learning as transformational for the individual is a primary goal (Merriam, et al., 2007). This goal is supported by the work of Jack Mezirow in the field of Transformational Learning and Stephen Brookfield's work in the field of Critical Reflection for Adult Learners. This concept of transformation of the adult learner through a critical reflection of their position and station in society and how they have taken for granted their learning as a precondition for autonomy and self-directedness strongly corresponds to the concept of *jita kyo-ei*. The concept of *jita kyo-ei* involves a mutual benefit to all parties involved in the relationship, dyadic ones such as teacher and learner, or community based examples, and society. The practice of *jita kyo-ei* in judo entails knowing where you as an individual stand in regards to your relationships and to take notice of the affects your actions and thoughts have on others whom you interact with. This idea of knowing where you are in relation to others allows the individual to take responsibility for how they act and where they seek out information that they need to further learning endeavors.

In regards to the connection between the third goal of self-directed learning: emancipatory and social action, and judo it will require a view of both core principles to understand the connection. In the third goal of SDL the individual must not only embody the first two goals of enhanced ability to take responsibility for their leaning and transformation through critical reflection but the complete control over all educational decisions needs to be shifted to the adult learner. The core principles of *seiryoku zenyo* and *jita kyo-ei* work in harmony to achieve this end. If the individual embarks on the "Do" with sincerity as Kano suggests then they will be mindful of their effect on others and themselves especially where learning is concerned. The learner will work to foster relationships with those that they seek out as sources of information and through the most efficient use of their energy will acquire the desired outcome in time. Through this transaction the learner has complete control over their learning outcomes and is mindful of how they learn in relation to the others that they seek out to learn from. This implies for the learner an emancipation in their learning to choose how and what they learn.

Finally judo was conceived as a way of life. The English translation for the name that Kano chose is The Gentle Way. Kano believed that the learning of the judoka would never end, that there would always be something else to learn, some new way of knowing in an endless quest. Self-directed learning has also been described by some researchers as a way of life. It encompasses not only the learning that can occur in formal settings such as classrooms but in the non-formal and informal learning that happens in the everyday life and lived experience of the adult learner. This form of learning spans the length of the learner's life and can be considered a lifelong learning endeavor.

### **Conclusion**

This exploratory conceptual piece examined the aspects of judo through the educational lens of its core principles: *seiryoku zenyo* and *jita kyo-ei*. I then drew a brief outline of the theory and practice of Self-directed learning, its main assumptions and three goals stated by Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007). Next I attempted to compare some of the similarities I saw and connections I found between the two theories of learning. Finally I have arrived at the conclusion and discussion section.

I believe that there are many connections and overlapping concepts that exist between both theories. A synthesis of both theories into a single educational model can be beneficial for both perspectives however I do realize that there are further avenues to be explored and researched before this can become generalizable and useful.

Some limitations to my exploration revolve around my own bias as a martial arts instructor. Through my practice I aim to instill the principles of judo into my students. I also attempt, within the confines of the setting I practice (a university class), to allow the students to be self-directed in their learning. I accomplish this by setting the example and being highly self-directed in my own learning as well as encouraging them to study further and seek out the resources to foster their own self-direction in learning, inside and outside of the martial art setting.

A further limitation occurs because these similarities are of my own conjecture and I am certain that there is room for discussion. This allows me to further develop my ideas on these connections through dialog with others who read this as well as generating new avenues for future inquiry and research.

One such avenue would be an in depth study of Jigoro Kano as a self-directed learner. There have been many biographies and retellings of his life but none have focused on his life through the lens of self-directed learning, at least not that I am aware of. This future area of research would allow a more complete view of the holistic system that he created, Kodokan Judo.

Another limitation is that Judo may be too westernized for a future cross-cultural study between an Eastern and Western theory of learning. By westernized I mean that the historical context that saw the rise of judo occurred during a time period when Japan was mostly embracing many Western influence. Educational theories and practices were being adopted and implemented nationwide and Jigoro Kano was brought up in this tradition. This may have biased the foundation of judo's principles toward more of a Western leaning. However this could be used as a future research endeavor as well, by using judo as a paradigm of cross-cultural synthesis, a true marriage of Eastern and Western theories of learning and being.

Another future course of research would be to empirically measure the relationship between characteristics that a martial artist practitioner exhibits and those of self-directed learners. Drawing correlations would strengthen the connections that I believe exist between both. In conclusion, both judo and self-directed learning are ways of life that promote the lifelong learning of adult learners within the relationships they inhabit. Further work is needed to be done before these connections can form a bridge over the Eastern and Western paradigm divide. It is my intention and hope that this exploration of the similarities between the Eastern paradigm of judo and Western paradigm of self-directed learning has added a beam to support this metaphorical bridge.

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